COVID-19 and the Chinese Christian Community in Britain: Changing Patterns of Belonging and Division

YINXUAN HUANG, KRISTIN AUNE, and MATHEW GUEST

ABSTRACT

This article draws on interview data with Chinese Christian leaders to explore how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting the Chinese Christian church in Britain. Based upon 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with Christian leaders in nine cities, the research identifies the ways in which the COVID-19 outbreak is shaping the dynamics of intra-group and inter-group connectedness within and beyond the Chinese church in Britain. It finds that COVID-19 is playing a significant role in social connectedness. This manifests in three ways: the re-configuration of a sense of belonging at church, the perception of outreach and evangelism, and the relationship between Chinese Christians from different regional backgrounds. These findings outline that the COVID-19 pandemic is triggering both cohesion and division. On one hand, the outbreak is functioning as an incubator for a stronger sense of belonging to the church and appears to encourage the church to reach out to seekers and the wider community. On the other hand, the pandemic is also dividing the Chinese church through conflicts in political views and social attitudes. Such conflicts, which are primarily about democratic values and views of China's communist regime, are particularly observable between Mandarin-speaking Christians from mainland Chinese backgrounds and Cantonese-speaking Christians from Hong Kong backgrounds. The article argues that the coronavirus pandemic has initiated deeper reconstruction and reform in the Chinese Christian community in Britain in terms of organization and mission.

INTRODUCTION

It is almost a cliché that the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to unprecedented social changes to the world as we know it. As Christian groups worldwide step into the crisis, their

responses to the pandemic will have significant impacts on the dynamics of Christianity at local, national, and global levels. Among all affected Christian groups, overseas Chinese Christian churches (OCCCs) in Western societies are a unique population facing distinct challenges. On one hand, like other religious groups, the Chinese church has to cope with the immediate impact of the pandemic for its congregations and review its role in wider society, including uncertainties concerning the sustainability of congregational life under COVID-19 conditions. On the other hand, the 'Chinese origin' of the pandemic clearly presents a significant impact on the perception of the wider Chinese community globally. Importantly, such impact tends to affect all 'visible' Chinese migrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other East Asian countries. This is observable, for example, through media coverage of racism and xenophobia against East Asians in Britain (Weale 2020).The pandemic thus has the potential to push OCCCs to re-negotiate their ethnic and religious identities in response to these new social and political issues in both their countries of origin as well as hosting countries.

This study explores the religious implications of COVID-19 for OCCCs from a social capital perspective. In the light of this approach, we consider the underlying logic of the church in terms of varieties of intra-group and inter-group relationships – amongst regular churchgoers, between church leaders and members, and with other religious and secular groups in the wider community. Using Chinese Christian churches in Britain as an example, this paper addresses the impact of COVID-19 on the relational aspects of OCCCs. We discuss the existing literature on the social capital approach to religion in the next section and, subsequently, give an overview of the historical and contemporary context of the British Chinese Christian Churches (BCCCs). In the third section of the essay, we present the findings from our study of BCCCs using data from 12 interviews with church leaders. Our concluding thoughts are presented in the last section.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is a burgeoning body of literature that adopts a social capital approach to religion, analysing religion in terms of the generation and maintenance of social connections and resources (Putnam 2000; Coleman 2003; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Huang 2015). The concept of social capital is defined by Harvard sociologist and political scientist Robert Putnam (2000: 19) as 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'. Putnam and others regard religion as an important setting for social capital, as social relationships play a pivotal role in religion. Social capital researchers are therefore concerned with the form, characteristics, and consequences of interpersonal and social networks. In his bestseller *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000: 66) quotes an activist co-pastor of the Dorchester Temple Baptist Church in Boston to elucidate the significance of the social capital perspective on religion: 'The church is people. It's not a building; it's not an institution, even. It is relationships between one person and the next'. In the first place, relationships are the very substance of any congregation – its basic woven fabric. Christian life, from a children's crèche during Sunday service to a large national gospel event, would not exist without the relational dimension.

The church is maintained through layers of relationships, involving its ministers, elders, co-workers, ordinary participants, and external parties. The nature of these links can be understood using Coleman's distinction between *vertical* and *horizontal* relationships (Coleman 2003: 37). Vertical relationships are embedded in the hierarchical structure of a congregation. By fostering passivity and subordination, some forms of vertical relationships between church leaders and others can be distant (Coleman 2003: 38). The primary focus of this study is on the other type of relationship: horizontal relationships, of which there are two types. The first type involves internal connectedness between church attendees with different sociocultural characteristics such as language, ethnicity, and social class. The second type of relationship is external and relates to the congregation's contact with other religious organizations and wider society.

The social outcomes of horizontal relationships – the social capital transmitted through them – can be described as either 'bonding' or 'bridging' (Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002). Bonding relationships reinforce in-group connectedness and identities, while bridging relationships bring together people across socially and culturally constructed boundaries. (Interfaith work is an example of bridging social capital.) 'Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity', explains Putnam (2000, p. 23), 'whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.' In migrant churches, the strong presence of bonding social capital in the form of close, supportive friendships is self-evident. For example, many Asian Christian churches in North America were inspired by a mission to help their co-ethnic peers to settle in the host country (Noh and Avison 1996). However, bridging relationships have increasingly become more visible with the increase in immigration to Western countries. The American literature asserts that mainline Protestant churches play a vital role in drawing together diversities within local communities, encouraging interethnic contact and generating interpersonal trust and collaboration (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 194). As we discuss in the next section, some migrant churches have also experienced growing internal diversity that presents new challenges for unity and cohesion.

Most previous research on religion and social capital has been conducted in an American context. As Putnam and Campbell (2010: 7, 523) point out, 'Americans have high rates of religious belonging, behaving, and believing', and 'most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths'. Britain and other parts of Western Europe present a somewhat different picture. Data from the 2011 UK Census and other national representative social surveys in Britain suggest that Christianity has been suffering a persistent decline in Britain in terms of both numbers and religiosity (Voas and Crockett 2005). Parallel to this has been a growth in the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu population. While some white-majority churches and older Christian denominations are experiencing decline (for example, Anglicanism and Methodism), it is spurious to assume that the social function of religion has declined in the case of migrant churches in Britain. Scholars have argued that

patterns of immigration and religiosity criss-cross each other in a bewildering variety of ways and may illustrate a complicated state of affairs (Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Davie 2015; Huang 2015). As far as Christianity is concerned, Goodhew (2012) finds a substantial church growth in Britain between 1980 and 2010; this is particularly discernible among ethnic minorities and provides a critique of the notion of dechristianization in Britain. However, the issue of social capital is still relatively under-researched in the study of British churches, especially when it comes to ethnic minority congregations such as BCCCs.

The CHINESE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN BRITAIN

While the influx of Chinese migrants and international students in the UK has attracted some scholarly attention (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015), few engage with the religious aspect of Chinese migration. The history of the first Chinese settlements in Britain can be traced to the early nineteenth century, when early Chinese migrants made a considerable contribution to imperial Britain's expansion of maritime trading ambitions in East Asia (Parker 1997). The timeline of Chinese migration to Britain after World War II (WWII) is divisible into two main parts. In the 1950s-80s, most overseas Chinese entering the UK were Cantonese-speaking people from Hong Kong and two mainland Chinese provinces (Guangdong and Fujian). After the 1980s, changes in domestic politics and international relations in mainland China resulted in the arrival of new waves of immigrants from mainland China and Hong Kong. Since China's economic reform in the late 1970s, the Mandarin-speaking Chinese population has been growing rapidly in the UK. International university students from China are a prominent example. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures, the UK attracted more than 120,000 students from mainland China alone for the 2018-19 academic year, nearly five times the number from India, the second-largest sending country (27,000). The figure from China represents almost a fivefold increase since 2000. Meanwhile, a large number of Hong Kongese started to settle in the UK in the 1980s as a response to the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration, which led to the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. It now appears that the beginnings of a 'new wave' or 'new

exodus' may be coming from Hong Kong as a result of the uncertainties related to the Umbrella Movement of 2014 (Chow, forthcoming).

In 1951, Reverend Stephen Y.T. Wang founded the first notable Chinese Christian congregation in post-WWII Britain, namely the Chinese Church in London (CCIL). Wang was also founder of the Chinese Overseas Christian Mission (COCM) in 1950. Now based in Milton Keynes, COCM has developed as the largest and leading Chinese Christian evangelical mission organization in Europe. The pioneering work of COCM and CCIL has resulted in Chinese fellowships and churches in many parts of the British Isles, all of which include Cantonese-speaking restaurant workers and students who stayed on after their studies, the latter often taking up white collar work (Chow, forthcoming).

Language plays a key role in the development of BCCCs. While early BCCCs were predominantly Cantonese-speaking, the emergence of the second and third generations of British-born Chinese as well as the arrival of increasing numbers of Mandarin-speaking immigrants from mainland China began to change the migrant community's profile in the late 1980s. As a response to the new situation, in the past three decades COCM and many historical BCCCs have developed Mandarin-speaking and English-speaking ministries alongside their Cantonese-speaking ministries. In the twenty-first century, the growth of Mandarin-speaking ministries has been much faster than the other two. Since most new Chinese immigrants come to Britain as students, skilled workers or entrepreneurs, city centres and university towns across Britain have become significant mission fields, with these ministries targeting students and new immigrants from mainland China.

It is worth mentioning that diversity within BCCCs is more than a dichotomy of mainland China versus Hong Kong. First, other East Asian and Southeast Asian states including Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore have also been prominent sending regions of ethnic Chinese immigrants to Britain (Chow, forthcoming). Chinese migrants from these states have largely enriched the dynamics of linguistic and cultural components of BCCCs. For example, while both mainland Chinese and Taiwanese are native Mandarin speakers,

their upbringing is largely distinct due to differences in political and social structure in the two regions. Second, multilingual skills have allowed mobility between different BCCC sub-congregations. Although older UK populations would be Cantonese-dominant, those who have facilities in Mandarin have been able to support the origins of Mandarin-speaking ministries. Bilingual or trilingual skills are nowadays not an uncommon requirement for Chinese religious workers in Europe.

Although the social dynamics of BCCCs have rarely been explored, the previous literature highlighted that OCCCs in Western societies are highly generative of community life and social connectedness (Chen 2002). Early sociological studies of BCCCs observed that the Chinese migrant churches in London are among the few successful examples of surviving and thriving Chinese migrant communities in Britain (Jones 1987). Owing to its traditions of collective worship, common fellowship and often tight-knit community, Christianity can be 'a powerful remedy for the lack of institutional affiliation commonly seen among Chinese in the diaspora' (Li 2019). A church may serve as not only a spiritual home, but also an incubator for social support, a proxy for Western values and culture, and a hub for connecting with the local community. Hence, it is not surprising to see that, as the two predominant groups amongst religious Chinese in Britain, Chinese Christians have expanded to almost double the number of their Buddhist counterparts (ONS, 2015). This is completely different from the religious landscape of the sending countries of ethnic Chinese.

Meanwhile, the recent development of BCCCs fosters communities and cohesion as well as boundaries and division. Chow (forthcoming) points out that 'the more established overseas Chinese have needed to cross a number of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries in order to work with these new waves of immigrants'. In studying BCCCs, we suggest that three caveats should be addressed when we think of religion as a context for social capital. The first caveat concerns the cultural aspect that underpins BCCCs' mission. Like many other OCCCs in the West, BCCCs are largely made of converts and develop an evangelical Christian culture (Rao 2017; Li 2019). Nevertheless, empirical evidence

suggests that Chinese evangelicalism does not necessarily break culturally constructed boundaries beyond the Chinese congregation, especially when it comes to the civic engagement of OCCCs in the hosting society. For example, Christian evangelism among mainland Chinese Christians in Britain and other Western societies tends to reinforce ethnic boundaries and articulates a unified, Chinese-centred identity (Huang and Hsiao 2015; Li 2019). The second caveat has to do with the boundaries between Mandarin, Cantonese, and English sub-congregations within the realm of BCCCs. The religious upbringing of Chinese mainlanders is different from that of other Chinese immigrants as the former is deeply influenced by the regime's anti-religious ideology and policies. (Yang, 2011). Benton (2011) noted that the younger generations of British-born Chinese tend to distance themselves from Chinese languages due to the awareness that English-language education can better ensure social integration and upward social mobility. Recent political unrest in Hong Kong, from the 2014 Umbrella Movement to the 2019-20 Fugitive Offenders amendment bill protests, is likely to have disrupted the relationship between Mandarin-speaking and Cantonese-speaking communities in Britain. Finally, it is important to monitor the social context of Britain. By 'social context', we mean the social issues that are relevant to the integration and livelihood of the Chinese community and the development of Christianity in Britain. The social context can be highly dynamic as it is determined by changing social as well as demographic, economic, and political factors at both local and national levels; it is key to understand how BCCCs and their social institutions respond to and interact with British society.

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CHINESE CHURCH IN BRITAIN

The empirical analysis of this study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews with Christian leaders conducted between March and April 2020. These constitute 'elite interviews', as they draw on the unique experiences and resources of influential insiders. As Moyser (2011) explains, elite interviews provide exclusive first-hand information by enabling the

interviewees to comment upon events or evidence, provide insights and interpretations and suggest fruitful lines of inquiry.

There is no clear-cut definition of the term ‘elite’ (Harvey 2015). In the case of BCCCs, ministers, directors, and other figureheads of churches and Christian organizations are not necessarily the only leaders with elite status. Fellowship leaders and church managers interviewed for this study hold important strategic positions in relevant social networks and are thus better able to exert influence on specific circles of congregants (defined by age, language, or occupation within BCCCs) and oversee internal and external changes. The 12 interviewees include two board members of national mission organizations (COCM and UK Ambassadors for Christ (UKAFC)), a minister and a manager at CCIL, and religious leaders and workers (three pastors, two elders, and three fellowship leaders) at other OCCCs in Britain. Their experiences cover different components of BCCCs ministry in terms of language (i.e. Mandarin, Cantonese, and English), location (including London, Manchester, Cambridge, York, Coventry, Bristol, Cardiff, and Edinburgh), and mission (e.g. teaching, student fellowship, and outreach). Combined, they offer in-depth insights on how COVID-19 is shaping the relationships of BCCCs from a wide range of perspectives. A fuller story of congregational life, one that includes more diverse views and critique of church leaders, can be told via interviews with members and attendees, but leaders’ interviews are nonetheless important.

The participants were initially asked open-ended questions, which were followed up by closed questions. While open-ended questions allow participants to articulate their views, closed questions, designed specifically for each participant’s unique background and experience, allow us to obtain specific data relating to the impact of COVID-19 on relationships. All participants have been anonymised and assigned pseudonyms.

The Re-configuration of Believing and Belonging

Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has turned the congregational life of BCCCs upside down. All 12 Christian leaders interviewed for this study felt that Chinese churches and mission organizations in Britain are stepping into uncharted territory. An immediate challenge that all BCCCs must face is the pandemic itself. For Chinese churchgoers, COVID-19 presents a trade-off between belonging and security. Chinese churches across Britain experienced significant reduction in attendance during the first two weeks of February when around half of their regular churchgoers chose to stay away from Sunday services. BCCCs have responded to the fear of pandemic within the congregation in both spiritual and practical ways. Many congregations have taken proactive measures to respond to the spread of virus, including updating news and information on their websites and social media, providing sanitisers on church premises, and tracing the travel history of participants and urging self-isolation as appropriate (Huang, 2020). Moreover, seven of the eight interviewees who had preached since the beginning of the outbreak mentioned that they had revised their sermons to talk about disasters described in the Bible, such as the plagues of Egypt, to share Biblical perspectives on causes of disasters and rewards of faith. Hence, while COVID-19 has sabotaged religious gatherings, it is also becoming a symbolic currency that is being used to re-organize and reshuffle the Chinese congregation in the long term.

Another major variance in congregational life is the role of technology. Due to the lockdown, all religious gatherings in Britain had to move online, if they wished to continue, from 23rd March 2020. Sermons, Bible studies, small groups and the like are currently being hosted and streamed via media and conferencing platforms including YouTube, Zoom, and WeChat. The inevitable use of technology to replace physical gatherings is unprecedented in church history in that it is a fundamental change in the communal practice and communion of the church. In the case of BCCCs, technology has created both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it has led to the revival of many BCCCs. Most of the church leaders in this study noted that a large number of congregants who stopped attending

church due to the outbreak had gradually returned after gatherings moved online. The flexibility of online gatherings has also allowed some groups, particularly students, to initiate additional online activities during the week. On the other hand, online congregational life has created exclusion and division. A consensus among the interviewees is that elderly people have largely been excluded from online congregational events due to poor knowledge of relevant software. In addition, online gathering also appears to sabotage opportunities for bridging social capital. A prominent example is that despite efforts to bring together members from Mandarin, Cantonese, and English sub-congregations of BCCCs, a unified gathering of the three has been almost impossible during the pandemic due to the technical difficulties of assigning interpreters in online meetings.

While it has hindered bridging social capital, the pandemic has led to relationship renewal within BCCCs. All 12 interviews suggest that the relationships among the congregants who continued to attend church gatherings after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Britain appear to have been significantly strengthened. The urgent missions to respond to the pandemic and keep the church working have led attendees to cultivate contacts, collaboration, and reciprocity within Chinese churches. Hence, bonding social capital within BCCCs has been reinforced by a moralized sense of group attachment – a feeling of 'stay with us' as opposed to 'leave us' (Williams 2003: 181). According to Feng, a COCM board member, COVID-19 has positively contributed to the spirituality and work efficiency of lay leaders and co-workers of COCM and BCCCs:

> The pandemic is like a filter – now only the most dedicated have chosen to serve together. Although some of them take up the role quite recently, the team chemistry of co-workers during the pandemic has been very encouraging in general … they connect well because they have the same faith, passion, and determination.

New Opportunities for Bridging Social Capital

As a Christian institution, BCCCs distinguishes itself from secular Chinese organizations such as clan associations and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association by functioning as a sanctuary haven from hardships and fear created by the pandemic. The function is particularly attractive to many Chinese who are under pressure due to isolation and loneliness during the lockdown. Notwithstanding the loss of former participants, most of the church leaders in our study maintain that attendance at weekly online Sunday services and fellowships has started to grow since the lockdown began. Lin, a UKAFC board member, suggests that a large proportion of the new population consists of university students and young professionals who are single. For these new BCCC constituents, it is primarily a sense of belonging, problem solving, and other benefits of social capital (rather than Christian faith itself) that motivates them to stay. Nevertheless, this development has inspired many BCCC leaders who hope the pandemic will contribute to a potential 'mass conversion' (Yang and Tamney, 2006: 125) of the Chinese in Britain to Christianity. The idea has resulted in a degree of implicit competition among Chinese churches. Interestingly, since the lockdown has largely eroded the location advantages of churches, Chinese churches and fellowships are now striving to attract not only Chinese people in their local areas, but also in other parts of Britain.

While serving Chinese migrant communities has always been at the core of BCCCs' evangelistic culture, COVID-19 has obliged BCCCs to develop their congregational norms of community engagement. The church's community engagement exemplifies how COVID-19 is inspiring new forms of bridging capital. One mechanism that drives such community engagement among BCCCs is racism. All 12 Christian leaders interviewed had personally received reports of their congregants being subject to hate crimes, racist abuse or COVID-19 related bullying. Some BCCCs with richer resources have organized counselling sessions to support the victims, the majority of whom are pupils at local schools. These incidents, combined with increasing media coverage of racism and xenophobia against East Asian

communities in the West, have impelled BCCCs leadership to reconsider their relationship with the wider community. They have been seeking to reduce an inherent tension between the self-interest embedded in a Chinese-centred mission and the civic function of the Church by articulating a mission to re-evangelise Britain – a place that had a huge historic impact on modern Chinese Christianity but has become more secular in recent decades. A direct product of this effort is the PPE (personal protective equipment) ministry of BCCCs, which has been coordinated by lay leaders in major British cities including London, Manchester, Coventry, Birmingham, and Cardiff. The PPE ministry functions in two ways: co-workers for the ministry, some of whom are supported by COCM, either organize donations of PPE to local hospitals or distribute free surgical masks in large supermarkets. The masks are packed in bags with Bible verses on salvation, hope, and love as well as information about churches in the local area. Haidong, an elder at a Chinese church in a large British city, discusses how the church set out to influence the community via its social ministry:

> The ministry is a way of implementing the Gospel's call to love people, including those who do not believe and those who are not like you. When we give these masks out to local residents, we tell them that Jesus Christ loves them; and as both a body of Jesus Christ and citizens of Britain, the Chinese church loves Britain and cares about British people.

Finally, our study suggests that social issues related to COVID-19 in the sending countries of Chinese migrants have functioned as a medium for new social capital as described in this paper. This is particularly obvious in the case of the Mandarin sub-congregation of BCCCs, which has been relatively prone to political and community insularity. All participants mentioned Li Wenliang, a whistle-blowing mainland Chinese doctor whose death was met with immense outrage and frustration across China and sparked an unusual demand for freedom of speech on China's social media (Huang 2020). This series of events has been widely discussed among BCCC leaders. Also crucial is the timing of the discussion, as

government-sponsored crackdowns, persecution against church leaders, and stricter religious regulations continue to challenge the survival of Christianity in Xi Jinping's China. Socially and psychologically, Chinese Christians in China became, during the second half of the twentieth century, part of the Chinese citizenry, with their Christian identity no longer distinguishing them from other people; Yi calls this the move 'from Christian aliens to Chinese citizens' (2010). However, COVID-19 has motivated a considerable number of ministers and lay leaders of BCCCs to develop an ideology of difference from China, based on the Biblical message of being the light and the salt of the world, as a response to what they perceive as a lack of virtues, justice, and freedom in mainland Chinese society. Importantly, this ideology does more than point to wrongs that need to be righted. In a social capital discourse, it helps convince people that they can do something about the wrongs by joining the side of the right – namely Christianity (Williams 2003: 182).

Conflict and Division

The impact of COVID-19 on the social capital of BCCCs is by no means entirely positive. The pandemic is tending to sabotage the internal connectedness across BCCCs by exacerbating the divisions between Mandarin, Cantonese, and English sub-congregations. In particular, all Christian leaders in our study who are involved in church ministry described the picture of an elevated 'conflict' between members with mainland Chinese backgrounds in the Mandarin group and members with Hong Kong backgrounds in the other two groups. Although cultural boundaries such as language between Cantonese-speaking and Mandarin-speaking Chinese Christians have been documented (e.g. Li 2019; Chow, forthcoming), the more recent conflict relating to COVID-19 is rooted in the uneasy political relations between mainland China and Hong Kong.

In the past decade, Hong Kong has witnessed a wave of massive campaigns for political self-determination. The most recent example was the 2019-20 Anti-China Extradition Bill protests, for which millions of Hong Kongese went into the streets for the protection of

Hong Kong's existing freedoms such as freedom of speech and religion from government intervention. According to three interviewees who have been involved in Cantonese ministry for at least ten years, Hong Kong Christians in Britain, particularly the younger immigrant generations, reacted to the protests by articulating their Hong Kong identity and distancing themselves from China. Although most church leaders tend to consider politics as earthly issues and urge their congregations to love their enemies, a significant part of the Cantonese-speaking sub-congregation still take up the call for social justice, freedom, and democracy in Hong Kong and openly express these political values. During the pandemic, many young Hong Kong Christians in BCCCs have been critical of the Chinese government, condemning the regime on the grounds of inhumane measures and COVID-19 cover-ups. While most of them would share this view only on social media such as Facebook and Twitter when China was still the centre of the outbreak, many more would openly accuse and criticise the Chinese government during church gatherings as the pandemic hit and escalated in Britain.

These accusations have been disputed and criticised by mainland Chinese Christians for being prejudiced and overkill, leading to confrontations in many aspects of congregational life. On the individual level, the study participants noted that conflicting views have triggered heated arguments between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Christians. Most of the arguments took place in online church groups and conversations. Moreover, the conflict also appears to have sabotaged the cohesion and collaboration between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Christians on the group level. As mentioned above, COVID-19 has resulted in a renewal of bonding social capital in BCCCs. However, such effect is only observable only within the sub-congregation and has rarely motivated collective or collaborative work between mainland Chinese Christians and other Chinese Christians. One minister who serves in both Cantonese and Mandarin ministry described the ways in which conflicting political views generate divisions:

> The clash [between political views] is tearing the church apart. It started during the [Anti-China Extradition Bill] and has become worse during the COVID-19 outbreak. Brothers and sisters do not feel like praying together, working together, or even talking to each other. I have witnessed wars in student fellowships, family gatherings, and even on social media…It is painful to watch. And both sides call on the church leaders to support the political views they express.

Consequently, our interviews suggest that the pandemic is presenting a negative effect on the more or less institutionalized social capital of members of BCCCs, as the aggregate of trust, collaboration, and cohesion is suffering a significant decline at the collective level. A key point to grasp is that the conflict has to do with how the two groups as well as other Chinese Christians reaffirm ethnic, cultural, and religious identities by examining their social and political status in both sending and hosting societies – processes that have been called 'reactive ethnicity' and 'reactive religiosity' in previous studies of ethnic minorities in the West (Diehl and Schnell, 2006; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Unlike their Cantonese counterparts, the majority of the Mandarin-speaking Christians of BCCCs were brought up in mainland China, where criticism of the Chinese government is deemed symptomatic of Western powers' inherent hostility against China's rise rather than the progress of civil and political rights. Hence, mainland Chinese Christians, like many other migrants from mainland China, tend to forge stronger national identity and express nationalistic values as a response to the West's criticism of China (Shi, 2014). Paradoxically, although social issues relating to COVID-19 have motivated more Mandarin-speaking Christians to openly to discuss religious freedom and social justice, some of the church leaders we interviewed insist that Mandarin congregations are usually more reluctant to point fingers at the Chinese government and its political leaders than are Cantonese-speaking Christians. By contrast, Mandarin-speaking Christians tend to use the language of 'submitting to governing authorities' and often cite Romans 13:1-7 as biblical support for

having faith in the ruling regime. As Britain descended from a safe zone into one of the hardest-hit European countries in the pandemic, the voice of Mandarin-speaking Christians has changed to a more pro-China position. More than half of our interview participants mentioned that a considerable proportion of mainland Chinese Christians in their congregations feel ‘unwelcome’ and ‘stranded’ in the West and hope to go back to China. While this feeling is partly influenced by media coverage and individual experiences of racism and xenophobia, it is also reflected in mainlanders’ belief that the Chinese system is working better than the British system in terms of both containing the virus and dealing with potential economic and social problems. On the contrary, although Britain’s conduct has also been criticized across Cantonese and English sub-congregations, this has rarely been translated into a recognition of the Chinese regime’s virus-related successes among many, particularly younger generations of BCCCs who are from Hong Kong.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has explored how COVID-19 is affecting the Chinese Christian community in Britain from a social capital perspective. The results from 12 interviews with national and local level Christian leaders show that the pandemic is bringing both cohesion and division to BCCCs. On the one hand, COVID-19 unites Chinese Christians by fostering fresh bonding and bridging social capital in times of crisis. The dynamics of such internal and external connectedness have helped BCCCs in establishing effective leaderships, renewing its evangelistic culture, and developing a social, public mission. On the other hand, however, the pandemic has made the existing boundaries among Chinese Christians even sharper. Christian leaders in this study reveal how culturally and politically constructed barriers between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Christians in BCCCs have been hardened during the pandemic. Trust and reciprocity thus remain frozen in these groups and becomes isolated in separate cliques upholding specific beliefs and values rooted in East Asian politics.

. Our research has several limitations of our research; more comprehensive investigation is required of the challenges and opportunities that BCCCs face in a COVID-19 fuelled Britain. One such limitation is that this study is unable to reflect the diversity of BCCCs, which is much more than a simple division between Mandarin-speaking Chinese, Cantonese-speaking Hong Kongese, and English-speaking British born Chinese participants. Chinese immigrant generations from other regions such as Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore represent a considerable population in BCCCs. For example, while political views and value orientations have become a source of conflict between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Christians, they may well be a mechanism for unity or separation for other groups (e.g. between Taiwanese and Hong Kongese) as well. Methodologically, the use of elite interviews has a significant shortfall as it can only offer insights from the leadership's perspective. This method does not allow us to examine, for example, the notion of social capital in BCCCs from the participants' perspective. A line of inquiry that deserves further exploration is how the impact of COVID-19 on BCCCs can be explained by variations of personal experiences such as migration history and occupational attainment. Finally, we see a need to consider contextual differences on the macro level to advance the analysis of the impact of the pandemic on Christianity. The study of BCCCs should not lose sight of the macro picture of economy, demography, and politics that characterises different local contexts in which BCCCs operate.

Despite its limitations, our study suggests that the notion of relationships has been and will continue to be centred in the discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on Christianity. Yi's (2010: 165) argument that the challenges for Chinese Christians 'are not how to adapt Christianity to Chinese society anymore, but how Chinese Christians can contribute to the global movement of world Christianity' is particularly worth noting amid the pandemic. It is thus our hope that the present study will stimulate more, and deeper, thoughts and work on OCCCs in a global context. Should that occur, our scholarly understanding of the rise of

Chinese Christianity and COVID-19 – two significant event in the recent history of world Christianity – will be the better for it.

Yinxuan Huang is research associate at the Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research at The University of Manchester. His research covers a range of social and political issues, such as trust, religion, ethnic minorities, Brexit, and Chinese society. Recent publications include the 2019 article 'Social Life and Political Trust in China: Searching for Machers and Schmoozers' in International Political Science Review and a forthcoming article 'Exploring the Imprints of Christian Upbringing in the 2016 EU Referendum' in the Journal of Contemporary Religion. Email: yinxuanhuang@hotmail.com

Kristin Aune is Professor of Sociology of Religion at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. Her research is on religion, gender and higher education. Recent publications include the book *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America* (coedited with J. Stevenson, Routledge, 2017), the report *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (with M. Guest and J. Law, 2019) and the article 'Christian university students' attitudes to gender' (with M. Guest) in the journal *Religions*. Email: ab8574@coventry.ac.uk

Mathew Guest is Professor in the Sociology of Religion in the Department of Theology of Religion at Durham University. His research focuses on the changing status of religious identities within higher education contexts, including the shifting configuration of Christianity in UK universities and the construction of Islam as an object of study, curiosity and suspicion. He is the author or editor of seven books, including *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (with Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner) and *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain* (with Alison Scott-Baumann, Shuruq Naguib, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Aisha Phoenix). Email: m.j.guest@durham.ac.uk

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